



VDACS Agritourism Initiatives

Agritourism is value-added agriculture, which has the potential to provide economic benefits to rural communities by bringing in visitors and creating new jobs for rural residents. Agritourism provides a tool to preserve working farmland by helping maintain the economic viability of working farms through diversification of income sources for these farms. It's a way for farmers to add value to basic commodities and to sell value-added products directly to the consumer. Agritourism is a prime method of educating the non-farm public about the realities of life on a farm as well as the business of agriculture. Virginia defines an agritourism activity as any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public to view or enjoy rural activities for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes. This includes farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions.

Since March of 2007, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service (VDACS) has conducted eight business development workshops specific to agritourism. These seminars have benefited farm entrepreneurs wishing to start an agribusiness enterprise or improve their existing agritourism related business. The workshops have been conducted in conjunction with the Virginia Tourism Corporation's (VTC's) Tourism Development Office and the Virginia Cooperative Extension. Topics covered include developing effective marketing strategies, attracting school groups by connecting agritourism activities to Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL's), utilizing social media to attract customers, training staff to provide quality customer service, and providing an overview of agritourism liability and insurance issues. The department also works closely with the Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office to help market and promote – both domestically and internationally – Virginia's farm wineries and the outstanding wines they are producing.

The VDACS Agriculture and Forestry Development Services (AFDS) unit works with entrepreneurs who wish to start or expand an agritourism related venture. For example, over the past few years AFDS staff has assisted in the opening of more than ten farm wineries and distilleries that rely on agritourism to support their farm businesses. Another prominent example of AFDS services is the upcoming grand opening of Moo Thru dairy bar located in Remington. This tourism reliant business is the expansion project of a local dairy farm. The Moo Thru retail location will offer ice cream and other value-added dairy products made from the family's nearby dairy farm. This new business, located on James Madison Highway, is being financed by funds from the dairy farm's participation in a joint county/VDACS purchase of development rights easement.

The Virginia Grown web site, www.VirginiaGrown.com, directs consumers to agritourism attractions around the Commonwealth. This interactive web site lists farms which offer pick-your-own (PYO) products, tours, product tastings, corn mazes, hayrides, horse-back riding, animal petting, lodging, and hosts weddings or other special events. These popular attractions help increase public awareness regarding the importance of Virginia agriculture and can provide increased revenue to Virginia farms. Virginia agricultural producers can list their farms and farm events for free on the web site.

VDACS also utilizes www.VirginiaGrown.com to promote retail farmers' markets. The web site, including a mapping feature, helps direct local residents and visitors alike to more than 180 farmers' markets across Virginia. Sales of locally grown items benefit not only the farm vendor, but they also stimulate economic activity for businesses in geographic proximity to the market.

The VDACS web site highlights Virginia food festivals and Virginia wine events. VDACS maintains a current list of festivals across the Commonwealth. Some of the most popular agritourism events include the Virginia Beef Expo in Harrisonburg, the Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester, the Eastern Shore's Annual Seafood Festival, the Pungo Strawberry Festival, the Virginia Pork Festival in Emporia, and the Suffolk Peanut Festival.

VDACS utilizes social media to promote agritourism events. The Virginia's Finest Facebook page and the Virginia Grown Twitter account are utilized to communicate with constituents and to actively market upcoming farm, food and wine events.

VDACS, in cooperation with Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association, publishes an annual guide to choose and cut Christmas trees. The guide helps consumers find Christmas tree farms that welcome visitors to participate in on-farm activities such as selecting a fresh cut tree, taking a wagon ride, wreath and garland making, or participating in a holiday themed food event. Christmas tree farming is a major agricultural industry in Virginia with more than a million trees harvested and sold annually from hundreds of farms throughout the state.

VDACS works in cooperation with the VTC welcome centers to promote agritourism venues including retail farmers' markets and pick-your-own (PYO) farm businesses. As an example, VDACS has utilized grant funding to provide a pick-your-own strawberry guide that will be used in welcome centers in the Virginia Beach area this summer. The annual value of pick-your-own strawberries sold in this area exceeds \$1 million. Many tourists visiting the Virginia Beach area utilize the guide to find local PYO operations.

The Virginia Horse Industry Board, which operates through VDACS, recently joined forces with VTC to develop and launch a new web page, "Virginia Horse Tours," on the VTC web site. The link for "Virginia Horse Tours" is www.VirginiaHorseTours.com. The web site promotes the Virginia horse industry to the thousands of international visitors who will travel to the United States for the World Equestrian Games (WEG), slated for later this fall in Kentucky. The goal is to entice these visitors to stop off in Virginia either before or after they visit the WEG and generate economic activity related to the equine industry in the Commonwealth.